"Dear Brother. . .I send you a brief account of 'The Action at Scarey Creek' . . . ." George S. Patton's Baptism of Fire

By Jay Carlton Mullen

As his Union force ascended the Kanawha River in July, 1861, Brigadier General J. D. Cox was more impressed by the beauty of the Kanawha Valley than by the prospect of an arduous and protracted war. A festive mood prevailed among the troops aboard the steamboats that were convoying his army. On the steamer's decks the soldiers cheered and the band serenaded the many Union sympathizers who hailed them from homes along the Kanawha's banks. Most Federalists assumed that suppressing "the Rebellion" would be an affair of short duration. Lincoln's call for volunteers was for ninety days—sufficient time to assert federal control over the recalcitrant southern states.

The responsibility for asserting that control in western Virginia fell to General George B. McClellan who had ordered Cox to advance into the area from Point Pleasant, Ohio. Cox was encountering the difficulties common to all commanders who were endeavoring to fashion capable military units in the summer of 1861: poor organization and discipline, insufficient equipment, and little military and combat experience among their personnel. Cox commented that his Kentucky regiments, comprised almost exclusively of Ohio River laborers, were "a rough and reckless class and gave a good deal of trouble by insubordination."[1]

Robert E. Lee had placed Brigadier General H. A. Wise in command of the forces that were hastily organized into the Department of the Kanawha in order to contest Cox's bid to control the area. The nucleus of the valley's Confederate forces had been the Kanawha Rifles, organized by VMI graduate George S. Patton, son of a former governor of Virginia. "Frenchy," so nicknamed because of his pointed beard, and his troops had distinguished themselves primarily as dancers and drinkers, but Cox's advance called them to meet the purpose for which they were organized.

Around Patton's contingent Wise's overall command was expanded to about 3,000 men. This approximated Cox's strength though the

[1] Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York: Century, 1884), volume 1, 137.

Confederates were spread throughout the valley from Gauley Bridge to the mouth of the Coal River. Patton commanded the advance elements of Wise's force and subsequently directed the Confederate forces in the Civil War's first clash of arms in the Kanawha Valley. The official accounts of this contest at Scary Creek were written by individuals not present at the fighting. However, in a letter to his brother Patton left a participant's eye-witness account of the hostilities. This epistle, now deposited in the manuscripts collection of the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, provides interesting insights into Patton himself as well as into the nature of combat in the earliest stages of this war.[2]

> Dear Brother—
> As requested I send you a brief & imperfect account of—
> The Action at Scarey Creek.
> Putnam Co. Va. July 17, 1861

began the letter throughout which Patton referred to himself in the third person. It continued with Patton's description of the disposition of Cox's and Wise's forces, including the nine hundred men stationed

> at the mouth of the Coal 12 miles below Charleston under Major Geo. S. Patton. Major Patton was then on the opposite side of the Kanawha River, & 10 to 12 miles below the nearest Confederate forces. The enemy had moved a column from Guyandotte which compelled Major Patton to send a large portion of his force down that road.

He then described Scary Creek, "a small mountain stream" with "rugged and precipitous banks" which empties into the Kanawha "about 2½ miles below the mouth of Coal River." Because of the proximity of the hills to the river, there was only a small strip of bottom land at the creek's mouth where a bridge was located. "Its banks were slightly wooded with trees and bushes affording some shelter."

After describing the terrain he explained his deployment tactics.

> As some of the Federals advanced in force Major Patton burnt the bridge & placed a picket there. Subsequent reflection satisfied him that it was a good place for a stand as both flanks of his small force would be, in a measure, protected by the river & hills—and he gradually threw nearly his whole disposable force there.

Initial contact between the two forces was made on Sunday, July 14, when a Federal reconnaissance patrol was greeted by Patton's two six-pound artillery pieces camouflaged in the bushes across Scary Creek. He commented, "this masked battery surprised them

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[2] "Dear Brother . . . I send you a brief account of 'The Action at Scarey Creek' . . . ." RB Box 202, Manuscripts Collection, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Patton's quotes throughout this article are drawn from this letter.

not a little and they beat a precipitate retreat." From his encampment downstream on the opposite shore Cox then ordered the 12th Ohio "to occupy the attention of the enemy in front of the creek."[3]

Patton's men remained on alert day and night until Wednesday, July 17, when his scouts reported that most of the Union troops had recrossed the river to the main Federal camp. He then withdrew his own troops to camp two miles from the creek and left only three companies at the creek to prevent a surprise. He recorded that

> the [Union] army had in fact crossed the river but it was only a *ruse*, and about noon the same day the Federal commander threw over the 12th Ohio Regiment Col Lowe, a large portion of the 21st Ohio Regiment Col Norton, a section of Artillery[4] (two 10 lb. rifled pieces) and a company of cavalry, in all about 1,500 men; with orders to march upon & rout the small force at Scarey.

When his scouts advised him of this movement "Major Patton dispersed his small force to meet them."

Messengers galloped away with orders for all of Patton's command to converge at the mouth of Scary Creek. The Major himself reined in at the battle site "just as the enemy's skirmishers deployed." A Confederate company forded the stream and occupied some buildings—a cooper shop, a country store, a stable, and some log and frame dwellings—while the Kanawha Rifles and the artillery stationed themselves on a knoll to Patton's left. "The enemy responded by deploying into line of battle on the opposite hill and bringing up his Artillery."

> The action was commenced shortly after two o'clock—the first guns being fired by the Confederate Artillery . . . The action soon became general—and in a few moments the two cavalry companies arrived, were dismounted, and Capt Lewis thrown into the woods to the left to prevent a [sic] annoyance by a flanking party, while Capt A. C. Jenkins' . . . men were held in reserve.

Troops continued to arrive from Patton's rear until "about 480 Confederates" were "sustaining the attack of four times their number. And this too without entrenchments or superiority of ground." After the artillery dueled for nearly an hour the Federals charged the buildings occupied by the Confederates on the far bank but were "gallantly met and repulsed." A second charge gained momentum when a Union artillery shot directly hit one of the Confederate cannons and killed the lieutenant who was directing its fire. "The other piece was then withdrawn, Major Patton thinking to hold it for use at the worst."

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[3] Johnson and Buel, *op. cit.*, I:88.

[4] Though it may have been a smoothbore overnight, Patton invariably capitalized the first letter of "artillery" throughout his account of the battle.

Patton described the Union assault saying

> our men were gradually being forced back and fell into some confusion—Sweeney still held his houses, but the odds against him forced him to fall back—

The Confederates, however, rallied to stem this attack. Although Patton modestly omitted describing his own role in this rally, General Wise reported to General Lee that when the Confederate line faltered "Colonel Patton dashed on horseback to rally his men."[5] Perhaps Patton neglected to recount this event fully to his brother because it might have been misinterpreted. His horse became frightened and attempted to bolt from the field. Horses inexperienced in battle are no more anxious than men are to race headlong into smoking cannon and rifle barrels. Initially Patton's men believed he was cowardly abandoning the field, but he managed to regain control of his mount and reform his troops. Then, he reports

> with a shout our men charged—drove them back across the creek—beyond the houses—& back to their original position. In the struggle Major Patton was severely wounded in the shoulder and was forced to retire a short distance to the rear.

Although he was removed from action by his wound, he described the arrival of additional Confederates from the rear and from the Guyandotte road. The cheering reinforcements "baffled" the enemy who "broke and fled in the utmost confusion. Pursuit was impracticable as Cox's whole army was only 4 miles to the rear, our ammunition nearly exhausted, and our little band satisfied with the issue of the unequal contest."

In fact, Patton's conclusion was in error. After he was wounded his troops panicked a second time and Captain A. G. Jenkins, the cavalry officer holding his company in reserve, again rallied the men. Then, as reinforcements continued to arrive, they advanced against the Federals to rewin their previous position and to capture a Union colonel unable to retreat because of his wounds.

His battle statistics were exaggerated. He recorded

> The Confederate loss was 3 killed and 9 wounded of which two died of their wounds. The yankees left 12 or 15 dead on the field, but by their own confession their loss was not less than 200 killed and wounded.

In his official report Wise listed two Confederates killed and two wounded. His report of 30 dead Federals contrasts with Patton's estimate of 200 dead and wounded.[6]

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[5] *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880), Series 1, volume 2, 266-82. All subsequent quotations by Generals McClellan and Wise are from this source.

[6] Ladislas Farago, *Patton: Ordeal and Triumph* (New York: Obleusky, 1963), 46.

The Union battle statistics were revised as the result of a bizarre incident after nightfall. Some Federal officers set about to examine personally the scene of the day's hostilities. They "amused themselves by a reconnaissance beyond the pickets," General McClellan reported, and they were captured.[7] Patton's description of the incident is more elaborate than McClellan's.

> Late in the evening Col Woodruff of the 2nd Kentucky—Col de Villiers of the 11th Ohio—Lt Col Neff—two Captains of the 2nd Kentucky, who strong in their faith of Yankee invincibility, and knowing our weak numbers—had ridden up to see the "rebels crushed," were captured, & spent many months in the "Libby."

The Libby was a warehouse in Richmond where Union officers were imprisoned.

Patton's initiative at Scary Creek stalled the Union invasion. "Cox checked on the Kanawha," McClellan tersely recorded. He sarcastically pronounced the action to have been "something between a victory and defeat," and he commanded Cox to advance no further while he threatened the Confederate rear himself with a flanking movement directed from the northwest toward Gauley Bridge. Disgusted with his subordinates he requested, "In heaven's name give me some general officers who understand their profession." McClellan's antagonist, Wise, reported the affair as "a glorious repulse of the enemy, if not a decided victory." Patton recorded these conclusions about the battle:

> The affair is chiefly remarkable as being fought so early in the war, against such odds of numbers and arms (for be it recollected we never had over 400 actually engaged, & they chiefly with mountain rifles & "flintlocks") and almost in sight—certainly in full hearing of Cox's whole army. These mountain men with—in many instances cartridges in their pockets, just organized & underdrilled —whipped 4 times their number of armed and disciplined Yankees & put them to a shameful and disgraceful flight—In the open field they met them face to face and conquered.

Subsequent events proved that the Confederate success at Scary Creek was of little strategic importance. Though Cox was stalled, McClellan's movement threatened Wise's flank and rear and forced the Confederates to withdraw from the Kanawha Valley to Greenbrier County. Patton himself observed that "the unfortunate course

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[7] It is highly likely that the junior Patton read this letter containing his grandfather's account of the battle at Scary Creek. Prior to its deposit in the Huntington Library it was in the Patton family's possession at their home adjacent to this library in San Marino. This is where the junior Patton was raised, and with interests in both military history and his grandfather's career it would be surprising if he had not read the letter. Whether or not he realized that his grandfather preferred to advance and fight after having been ordered to "retire gradually" is a matter of conjecture.

of events in the Northwest robbed us of the legitimate fruits of victory & Wise was compelled to fall back, to secure communications."

In the perspective of history the strategical insignificance of the Battle of Scary Creek has understandably caused it to pass unnoticed. Measured against Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, or Shiloh, of what consequence is a brief check in the Union advance up the Kanawha? But not only has Scary Creek passed unnoticed in history, it passed unheralded at the time. The accounts of Patton's success on the Kanawha arrived in Richmond at the same time as the news of the Confederate victory at Bull Run. Consequently, as Patton suggested, Scary Creek "excited scarcely passing attention." He closed his letter to his brother saying

> It is now forgotten, except by those who first met the enemy, and who still talk of "Scarey" around their campfires.
> Geo S Patton

If Scary Creek was of so little importance or interest either at that time or to later historians then why should it be of interest after over a century? Of course this sparsely documented battle should be of interest to all West Virginians who care about their state's past—its battles and its sons who fought those battles. But it may also have interest extending beyond the borders of West Virginia.

In his official report Wise recorded

> I had ordered Col Patton to retire gradually from Scarey Creek . . . But when Norton approached he returned to Scarey Creek and met him and his 1,200 there with 800 men and two iron sixes.

Though ordered to withdraw, Patton preferred to advance and engage the enemy. He has not been the only Patton to welcome combat.

In *Patton: Ordeal and Triumph,* a biography of World War Two's celebrated George S. Patton, Ladislas Farrago maintains that "Patton's grandfather and namesake" was "his inspiration" and "his idol after whom he strove to pattern himself."[6] The initiative that the senior Patton displayed in ignoring orders to retreat and advancing instead to Scary Creek to meet the enemy could indeed have been an inspiration to his idolizing grandson.[7] If this was part of the pattern the grandson strove to fit then he was eminently successful, for advancing to meet the enemy was the junior Patton's outstanding military characteristic. So perhaps when the Americans in George S. Patton's 3rd Army flooded across Europe in 1944-45, the headwaters of a small tributary in that flood might be traced to West Virginia at the mouth of Scary Creek on a July day in 1861.